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ERIN
MORRISON

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The Contemporary Art Digest

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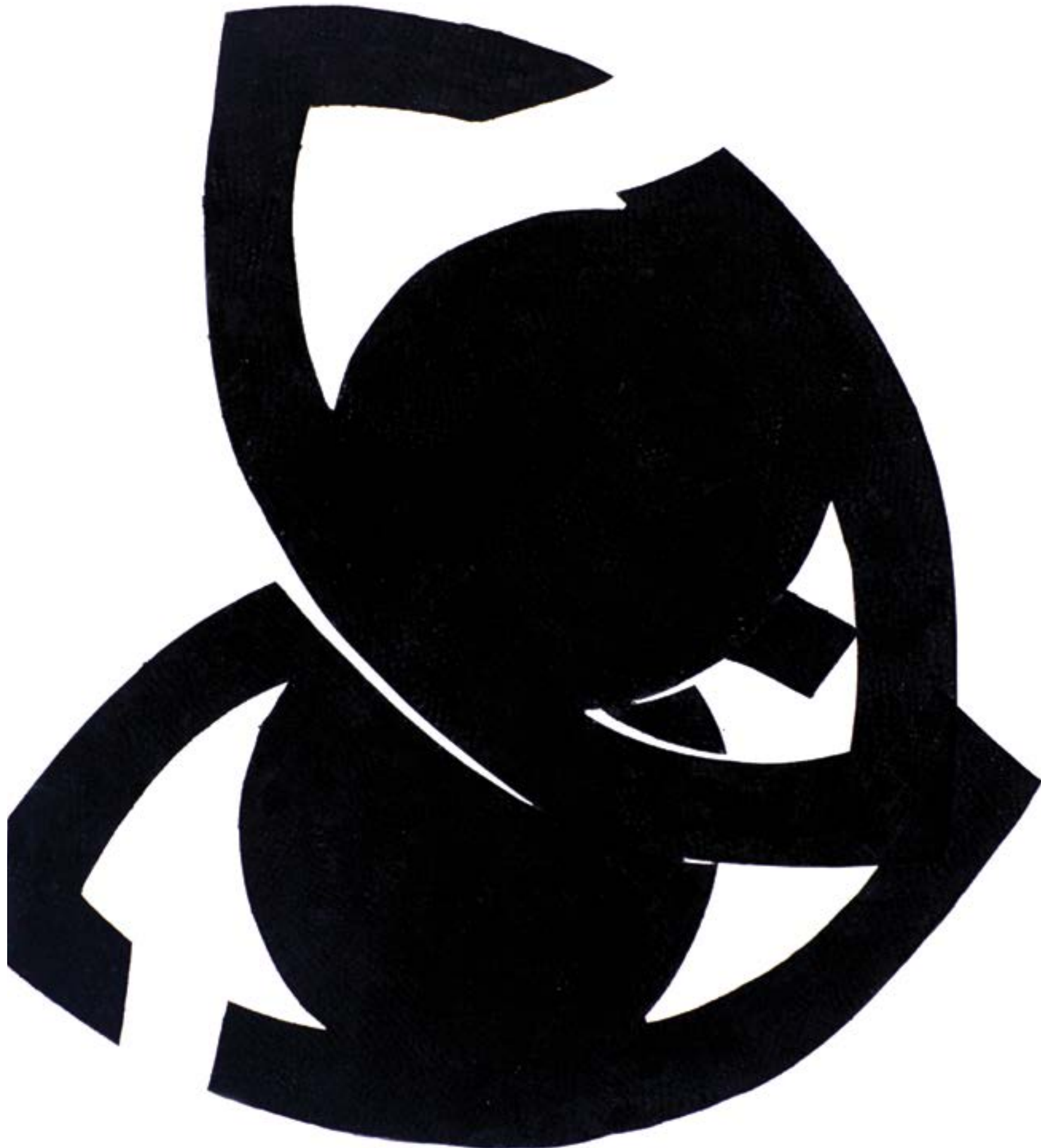
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**THE
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Relief, Samuel Freeman Gallery, 2015



MEET

ERIN MORRISON

Evicted from a shared studio following the birth of her son, Erin now deftly entertains multiple roles at her home studio in Northeast L.A.— mother and wife, framer in the back alley, artist in the garage. With work that defies categories, so does she.

Born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, Erin came to Los Angeles in 2011 to pursue her MFA from UCLA. Grinning, she admits that after three years of graduate school she was grateful to see her program end. Her work became increasingly sculptural while a student, beginning with casts she made of quilts she'd herself sewn. A caring touch and attention to detail permeate her forms across mediums from paintings to reliefs. While The CAD photographs her recent work, she helps block light from her garage window and mentions off-hand that her mom regularly sewed new curtains for their house growing up. It's easy to detect this propensity to adorn among the objects that line the shelves in her living room and hang in the unused wallspace of her studio. So too do we see it in her dazzlingly leafed gypsum reliefs, which create a feeling of glamor out of readily accessible materials.

The material delicacy of Erin's touch in no way cramps her sense of humor, which sweeps broadly through our conversation with self-assured ease. She tells the story of losing her studio, giving birth to her son, and having a solo show at Ochi Projects shortly thereafter. The exhibition, entitled *The Letdown* (2016), was a major conceptual nexus for Erin, who was increasingly introducing



her own life into the work she was making and showing. The term “letdown,” the title of both the show and a dyptch it featured, references the release of oxytocin that occurs during breastfeeding, which creates an increased bond between mother and child. The show “recall[s] a memory of simultaneously experiencing the letdown breastfeeding her son while feeling extreme despair watching Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign concession speech,” (Ochi Projects). We see in Erin’s work both from *The Letdown* to now a keenness of feeling that lays bare issues of personal and political pain with stark and fearless honesty.

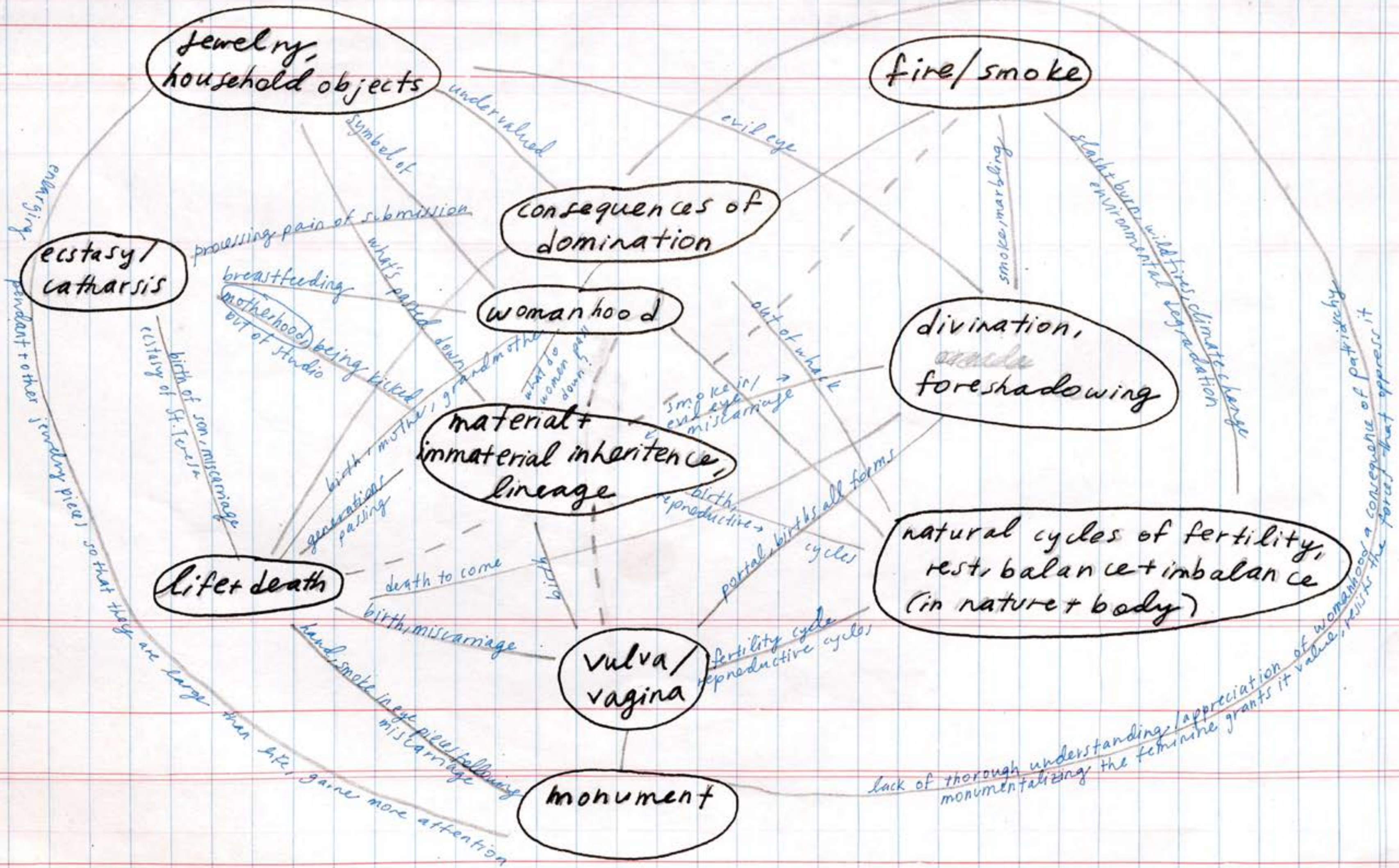
Erin is the founder of Gallery Artist Reform Los Angeles and a contributor to The Binder of Women, a collection of prints intended to increase the collection and exposure of women artists. She is represented by Ochi Projects in Los Angeles.

IN A NUTSHELL

Erin's work evokes a spiritscape in which smoking palms and evil eyes warn us about what is to come should we not stray from our path of endless consumption and a propensity to hold power over one another. She suggests that at the root of this disaster lies a parallel disregard for the earth and the feminine, and that the same forces that voluntarily mine sacred land for its resources likewise reduce women to sexual objects or domestic laborers. Offering no simple solution, Morrison instead looks toward the figure as host for the pain and ecstasy of living cognizant to these extremes. Her yoni works, made in 2018 – simple, monumental reliefs in black and white – depict the vulva and vaginal opening in a vast empty plane, likening it to a universe of its own, a portal through which all forms are born. Turn your eye and these works become eyes themselves, returning your gaze unashamed and unafraid. Her laborious articulation of the anatomical and material details of women's lives argues for their inherent worth. We celebrate Erin's work, which celebrates these reclaimed histories.



Fig. 1: *Black Mirror*, 2016
Ink, enamel and wax on hydrocal, 28 5/8 x 35 3/4 inches







THROUGH ERIN'S EYES

Erin directs her attention to figurative elements, including hands, genitals, images appropriated from jewelry the artist owned or personally inherited, and living elements of the natural world including palms, flowers, and snakes. Each subject features independently, the star of its show, often centered and taking up most of the composition. In some pieces, other earthly symbols surface including smoke, waves, and planetary orbs. Prior work gave platform to household items, as in her graduate thesis work and her show at Ochi Gallery titled *Object Decorum*. Her use of quilting as a foundational component of her casting process similarly conjured themes of domestic material culture. The quilt did not always feature as monolithically as her recent subjects and was, rather, used more as a ground on which to explore further visual ideas.



Fig. 2: *The Study (UUCU)*, 2015
Oil, ink and wax on hydrocal, 53.5 x 87.25 inches



Fig. 3: *Objects in an Evening Window*, 2014
Oil, ink, and silk on gypsum cement, 67 x 94 inches





Erin's paintings are made from a plaster-polymer using a casting process. Casting is a technique by which an empty form acts as a receptacle for a liquid that hardens through chemical or physical state changes. Once solid, the original material (known as the mold) is pulled off, leaving only the cast, or the liquid-turned-solid that hardened around it. Erin's casting process utilizes layers of linoleum she builds up to articulate a rough form, stratified like a topographical map. Sometimes she uses materials with texture that transfers into the plaster, such as woven fabrics or palm fronds. The resulting cast picks up this texture so precisely that the plaster sometimes doesn't look like plaster at all, but whatever the original material was.

Similar to printmaking in the way that information is transferred from one surface to another, casting can likewise be used to make multiples, depending on how the process takes place. Some molds can only be used as a one-off project if the mold is fragile and loses its structural integrity in the casting process. Such is the case with Erin's cast quilt pieces, in which she patches together fabrics for the exclusive purpose of casting a single time, by which the originals are destroyed. In other cases, molds or components of molds can be reused. *The Letdown* reuses molds in the way; the diptych casts are not identical but borrow several elements from one another. Final works can also

IN PROCESS



be recast using silicone, offering a mold that can be reused to much greater degree, allowing whole works to become editions.

After the casting process is complete, she takes the plaster forms and grinds away at their surfaces using traditional sculpture tools. This is her chance to smooth out the stratified layers of cast linoleum from which the form was taken. When casting and shaping is complete, the artist uses oil paint or enamel to cover the works surface. Plaster offers an absorbent, multi-dimensional surface on which to apply oil paint that is archival, unlike paper, which over time disintegrates and is flat, and unlike canvas, which is flat and upon which paint tends to sit on the surface.

Over time the artist's relationship with color has simplified. In her graduate thesis exhibition she applied color in a more painterly way; now she uses it sparingly if not altogether omitting it in her more recent work. She explains that this new work doesn't demand complicated color relationships, implying that form and content supersede color's importance. Rather than abandoning it, she likens color's recent omission to putting something in her back pocket for later use when needed.

◀ Pouring cast for *The Letdown*

Fig. 4:
The Letdown (dyptych), 2017
Enamel on gypsum cement
87 x 33.5 inches (each panel)







Fig. 5: *O.K.O.K.*, 2016
Enamel and ink on gypsum cement, 52 x 42"



Fig. 6: *Sixty-Nine*, 2016
Enamel and ink on gypsum cement, 52 x 42"

The Contemporary Art Digest & Erin discuss life, art, and the the work she’s making today.

IN CONVERSATION

THE CAD: You reference both the experience of breastfeeding and of your more recent miscarriage as major influences in your work. What you’ve been making most recently seems different than *The Letdown*, the solo show you mounted the year following the birth of your son. Emotionally, conceptually, and materially — what has changed?

EM: The most recent work has been a reflection on my own body, its limitations, and examining the physical and emotional experiences of labor. The methods for producing these sculptures have been pretty consistent for about five years now, but I’ve lately become more interested in applying materials to the surface that enhance it rather than detract from the natural beauty of the gypsum. Applying stains, flocking, metal leafing, and polishing the surfaces have all been really satisfying. While I still geek out on surface I am tremendously interested in the iconography I’m using as well. I use that word instead of “image” because I’m not as interested in the graphic as much as I am the shape, and how that can be manipulated and embedded into another material. In the past I have been resistant to producing narrative works, but with the drama of the past two years the work is now almost entirely about reflecting on the current state of events and how I internalize them. Some of the new work is also deeply personal in that they are reflections of miscarriage and childbirth, and the disillusioned romanticism history painting has ascribed to motherhood. *The Letdown* was a much more digestible exhibition, in that the subject matter seemed more approachable and maybe easier to talk about.

THE CAD: When you consider the move home to Arkansas (or more generally leaving L.A.), there are lots of obvious reasons I can relate to that make this a compelling possibility — more space for less money,

being close to family, lots of access to the outdoors. Are there other reasons? Have you anticipated how this shift might influence your work?

EM: All of those things are a big incentive for me. But it’s hard to not think about them without the drawbacks of rebuilding a social network that took years to establish, and distancing yourself from an ever circulating feast of exhibitions, performances and lectures. Part of me thinks I’m lucky to live in such a digital era, that I can still access so much of these things through social media, but the most elemental part of art is about participating and bearing witness. I hate to think about missing out on the incredible work being made in Los Angeles right now, but even living here it seems there is just too much to do. The reality is that I need more space for less money, and for the time being it’s just not possible to do that. Are there other reasons? YES. I’m starting to understand that a lot of pretty phenomenal female artists have made this adjustment of moving away to have cheaper space after having kids, or moving their studio home. Although I think it’s a bit of a cultural issue of acceptance it’s also tied to a historical diminishment of female labor and self-reliance. I know of very few female artists that can confidently say they are self-employed mothers, but I see the roles reversed so often, where my male artist friends have children and the value of their work goes up, while their wives provide the more stable portion of the family income. It seems to be a bonus that women artists don’t get. I know of so many female artists that take on multiple low-paying adjunct teaching positions while their male contemporaries get the tenure-track. I know a few men who hustle that hard, and I have a lot of respect for them, but they are much fewer in number comparatively. It’s a double standard that needs to change.



Fig. 7: *Marbled Palm*, 2016
Ink and wax on hydrocal, 29 x 29 inches

Fig. 9: *Byzantine Palm*, 2016
Ink and enamel on hydrocal, 32 x 32 inches

Fig. 8: *Red Palm*, 2016
Ink and wax on hydrocal, 31.75 x 31.75 inches

Fig. 10: *Palm with Cut-Out*, 2016
Ink and graphite on hydrocal, 25 x 25 inches



THE CAD: In your own childhood, what was your relationship to art and/or objects that indicated wealth or status, i.e. fancy things? What were the material conditions of your home spaces like? What moments growing up marked your growth into class-consciousness?

**“Fire and brimstone.
Those images are unfortunately
seared into my brain.”**

EM: A lot of my experience surrounding wealth growing up had more to do with giving the impression of financial status rather than necessarily having it. I have horribly expensive taste when it comes to fashion and food, but because I’ve never really had the money to make that work it’s been a goal of mine to replicate the experience by being more savvy in my thrift store shopping and in the kitchen. My father was a financial advisor in the 80s-early 00s. I am very conscious of the 90s economy bump because after graduating college into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression I came to realize how much I took for granted. My mother was a school teacher and taught everything from Civics to Theology to Advanced Biology, but in her pastime she had a penchant for crafting and sewing. She sewed almost all of me and my twin sister’s clothing (same patterns but variations in color to emphasize that we were not identical), and she built a three-story shingled and carpeted 3-foot Victorian dollhouse. She is still a dedicated craftperson and can make just about anything. I was very inspired by that because I knew that if I couldn’t afford something maybe I could try to make it.

THE CAD: Some of your artworks reference your grandmother. Can you tell us more about her? Where did she grow up? What were your interactions with her like?

EM: I had two very different grandmothers. My mothers’ mother grew up on a farm in Arkansas, was a devout southern Baptist, married at age 15 and had three daughters. Her name was Ouida (pronounced *Wee-da*). My father’s mother, Rose, raised four sons grade-school through college after her husband died in a car accident on the Memphis bridge at age 40. He was a traveling watch salesman. She worked multiple jobs to support her family. Almost all of her sons studied on an athletic scholarship. She was a chain smoker and a drinker but she loved cross country road trips in her RV and told the most amazing stories. Always operating without a filter, something I think I’ve inherited.

THE CAD: Can you describe what experiences, relationships, and structures helped define your notions of womanhood as a child? How have these changed over time?

EM: I would say that the understanding of womanhood for most children has more to do with cultural conditioning and roleplaying, whereas over time the experiences of womanhood become more complex and less rigid. I think there is a kind of masculine/feminine balance that I seek in my life and my work. There have been so many times that people were surprised to discover I was a woman if they had seen my work first. It’s hard to tell if that is because my name could also be phonetically interpreted as masculine, or if something about the work can be identified as “less feminine” in an aesthetic sense, but I welcome this confusion.

THE CAD: Were puberty, intimacy, fertility, pregnancy, miscarriage, or menopause openly discussed in your household and community growing up? What spaces since have you participated in that have informed your thinking on these experiences personally and politically?

EM: Although my mother was a sex-ed teacher, I didn't really understand what sex was and how the reproductive system worked until high school. This may have to do with my shame after a boy approached me on the playground to share that my mother had told him what a labia was that day. My guess is that many Catholic adults feared talking about human sexuality would encourage premarital sex, so the topic was typically neglected unless referring to God's wrath of promiscuity in the form of STDs, specifically the kinds that went untreated and mutilated your sex organs. Fire and brimstone. Those images are unfortunately seared into my brain. I think since high school it was a goal of mine to understand as much as I could about these human urges. I remember much of my free time in college involved going to gay bars and drag shows with my friends in Memphis. I was also brought up in a pro-life household and my mother being an active volunteer for Birthright would take me to rallies and marches. After a pregnancy scare in college and experiencing birthing a child myself, I have very different opinions on reproductive rights and consider myself pro-Choice. After a few drinks on the porch my mother and I will get to talking about our differences on the topic, but after arguing each other's points I think we've come to realize there is very little chance of changing each other's minds. These discussions usually end in a stalemate.

THE CAD: In what ways have you yourself or others asked you to confront transphobia and internalized misogyny in your exploration and presentation of the vulva and vagina?

EM: Honestly, I haven't been asked about it. I think separating an organ like the vagina from the body creates a disambiguation in how we define sex and ownership. Turning the phallus or vagina into a symbol might heighten the male/female binary for some, but my goal in its castration and enlargement was to present something usually fetishized through porn in a way that would normalize it.

THE CAD: You reference the flower as a symbol of the feminine and part of a vulvar language you are enacting (with homage to Judy Chicago, Louise Bourgeois, and Georgia O'Keeffe). Do you personally relate to the flower in this way? How do plants and other natural forms or forces inform your visual inventory and the spirit-scape you are conjuring?

“I think this denial is a pretty good indication of just how out of touch (or consciously dismissive) the general population is with the organ.”

EM: It's funny, so much of the imagery I made in high school directly referenced Georgia O'Keeffe's representation of the flower as a source of inspiration. I would say the vulva works that I call “Odalisques” embrace kitsch in a specifically historical context, especially given that this part of the body is typically represented tangentially by more admissible imagery, like the flower. My mother tells me she really likes the “leaf” sculptures, and it's pretty funny that people are so used to seeing the vulva in art as the flower that when it's meant to be a true likeness the mind still forces one to read it as a flower or “leaf.” I think this denial is a pretty good indication of just how out of touch (or consciously dismissive) the general population is with the organ. Judy Chicago wrote an incredible book in the mid 70s called *Through the Flower*, that I would say was my introduction to feminism, and she really captured this problem well. There is an undeniable stigma that is attached to work by women about women's bodies. If I can speak freely about that I would say that a good amount of this work has not been taken seriously because the people that generally support emerging artists in a commodity market (painting and sculpture specifically) appear to be more drawn to the ornamental than the deeply personal or subjective. I sense that a lot of women make tremendous efforts to sex up their work, and I think that is something I'm monitoring in myself because at the moment I'm making intentionally seductive objects.



◀ The preceding interview took place between Serena Caffrey and Erin Morrison via email in the weeks following The CAD's visit to Erin's studio. These questions arose after meeting in person and seeing her work in an intimate setting.

Fig. 11: *Solstice Ritual 1*, 2015
Ink and guache on hydrocal, 63 x 53 inches



Fig. 12: *Wildlower*, 2018
Oil enamel and Flashe on gypsum cement, 26 x 30 inches



Fig. 13: *Ecstasy 2*, 2017
Enamel on gypsum cement, 41 x 53.5 inches





Fig. 14: *Odalisque White* and *Odalisque Black*, 2018
Oil enamel on gypsum cement, 43.5 x 42.5 inches

The background is a piece of marbled paper with swirling patterns of grey, white, and black. Overlaid on this are several large, solid black circular shapes that partially overlap each other, creating a complex geometric pattern.

SMOKE IN EYES

“They said ‘some day you’ll find
all who love are blind.’ When your
heart’s on fire, you must realize,
smoke gets in your eyes!”

The Platters

Essay by Serena Caffrey



Fig. 15: *Smoke in Eyes 1-2*, 2018
Nylon fibers and ink on paper, 26 x 30 inches

Sitting in Erin Morrison’s studio one Saturday morning in October, I try to imagine what it might be like to be born here. Some sixteen weeks old, Erin’s son, Guston, entered her studio a newborn, nursing. At the time, Morrison was still working in a shared studio. Now, in her home garage, there’s a sign above the table proclaiming, “No Liquids on Desk!” and when she leans a painting against the door leading to the house, she quickly corrects herself. “Not a good move,” she laughs, referencing the possibility of a family member galloping in without warning. Seeing the recent work through the lens of her son’s life, currently three years old, the question of what Erin has made since he was born takes on new significance. Her recent life as a mother seems inextricably wound into the work, which she made initially with Gus in arms. Now running around in dinosaur pajamas, it is amazing to think that his whole life is contained in the time that Erin has been working in this studio, since the 2016 election campaign and the resulting presidency, in all of her work from *The Letdown*, and everything she’s made since.

Looking at Morrison’s work as a whole, the centrality of her role as a mother both in our interview and in her recent pieces is not surprising. Giving attention to the details of women’s domestic lives and lineages has been thematic across Morrison’s work since graduate school, during which time she

enlarged household objects, jewelry, and quilts. Such is the case, for example, with *Eye Chain Silver* (Fig. 19), featuring a necklace of hers from the 90’s — an iteration of the ancient symbol meant to ward off bad omens. Other jewelry pieces are hand-me-downs from her grandmother Rose, who raised four sons alone following the death of her husband at age 40. *Head Game* (Fig. 16) references a brooch Rose wore mimicking a military pin decorated with four heads, symbolizing her sons. In this celebration of matrilineal inheritance through material culture, the artist remarks on how historically women have been limited in what they’ve been able to pass down to the generations below them. “It’s usually not land or a business. It’s jewelry.”

**“When you start to treat
[the vagina] as a symbol it has
all of these other connotations.
It becomes a barrier, like an
astral plane or something, the
metaphor for the universe. [...]
It’s a portal; it’s a gateway.”**

Had we been born into Erin’s studio the day of our interview, we would find ourselves face to face with the very portals that brought us there (Fig. 14). Yoni, from Sanskrit, has been appropriated in the West as a sacred word for vulva, or the external genitals including the clitoral shaft, the inner and outer labia, the vaginal opening, and the perineum. Here, Morrison depicts the vulva and vaginal opening as emerging in low relief from a vast square plane of plaster. The two pieces hanging next to one another, the first entirely white and the second black, are both finished until their whole surfaces are smooth. Soft ridges delineate her subject, reduced here to one version of its essential forms. Morrison wryly calls this series “*Odalisque*,” which references the chambermaid of a Turkish harem who frequently became the subject of Western painters’ gaze.

There is something cynical about these pieces — understandably so given their context (consider, for starters, the #MeToo movement). “[...] these vaginal, yonic kind of pieces, I call them ‘Odalisque’ because there’s been such a history to the muse and painting women in this kind of reclining defenseless position as the object. I liked the idea of taking a kind of pornographic view of the most coveted part of the female, [...] this very sensitive part of the body, taking it in sculpture and elevating it through the female gaze to the point where it has this kind of power and it becomes monumentalized.”

Presented hairless, colorless, and divorced from the body to which they belong, these yoni works toy dangerously with being an object in the same way that pornographic images make bodies objects upon which the viewer imagines how they would act. “But you know at the same time when you start to treat it as a symbol it has all of these other connotations.” Elliptical, with concentric circles within it, the vulva becomes galactic, a universe out of which all forms are born. Next to the pieces featuring an evil eye in Erin’s studio, the vulva takes on resemblance to this seeing organ, especially the two pieces side by side. Interpreted as such, either a vast spatial body that conjures all life or an omnipotent eye that challenges the viewer’s objectifying gaze, these genitals take on a defiant resilience, as if boasting their alchemical powers.

Made in the wake of a miscarriage, the *Odalisque* works might be seen as a reprise of *The Letdown*, which responded in part to Erin’s experience of being evicted from her studio following the birth of her son. Both the title of a diptych (Fig. 4) and an exhibition, the term “letdown” refers to the chemical experience between mother and child following the release of oxytocin during breastfeeding. In language, a letdown is something that disappoints us, a place where our expectations are unmet. When Morrison watched Hilary Clinton’s succession speech while breastfeeding her son, she found herself within both meanings of the word, enacting its double entendre, chemically elated and deeply defeated at the same time. In the same way that *Odalisque* presents seemingly contradictory reads of the

same subject, *The Letdown* likewise holds these opposing extremes simultaneously. Her sensitivity of feeling knows both edges of the blade: rather than reject what is painful about her experience, Morrison understands that sorrow, rage, and remorse all give form to its fullness, alongside feelings of belonging, joy, or beauty.

**“And because it’s so frontal,
because it’s centralized, because
it’s in your face [...] — you just
have to contend with it.”**

Ecstasy 1 (Fig. 18) and *Ecstasy 2* (Fig. 13), which reference Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, reiterate this notion. Saint Teresa’s outstretched hand receives God’s presence with a pain “so great [...] it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.” This accepting of life’s conditions — in Saint Teresa’s case the intense glory and pain of communing with God and in Erin’s coming to terms with the real and repeated obstacles women face professionally and physically — is not a defeat. Acceptance, rather, is a tool that gives us the strength and clarity of mind to respond wisely to our circumstances. Formally, *Ecstasy*, *The*

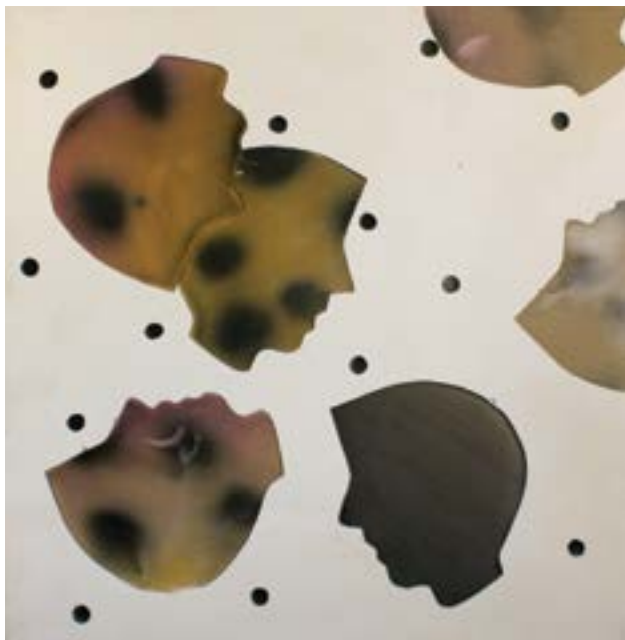


Fig. 16: *Head Game*, 2018
Ink and enamel on gypsum cement, 30 x 36 inches



Fig. 17: *Odalisque (Pink Wave)* (Detail), 2018
Enamel and Flashe on gypsum cement, 39 x 43 inches

Letdown, and *Odalisque (Pink Wave)* all employ wave-like forms that visually recall oceanic waves and metaphorically reference the waves of feminism. Gilded so that they catch the light, these waves could just as well be a field of flames. Morrison simultaneously conjures both fire and water, creating an elemental environment both meditative and fierce.

If showing *The Letdown* at Ochi Projects in 2017 was a reprisal to the sudden loss of her studio following her son's birth, *Odalisque* is a probing self-portrait about the capacity of the human body to create new form. Made immediately following her miscarriage in 2018, *Smoke in Eye* (Fig. 15) is a plea for some sense of order amidst her grief, a question to self if she can, in fact, hang tight through the waves.

“Considering miscarriage generally — the expectation to bring new life into the world and then to lose this chance against one’s will without warning — it is indeed an even more painful event than The Platter’s description of love lost, one of which we’d been so sure.”

The poetic darkness underlying *Smoke in Eye* points to broader themes of disillusionment underlying Morrison's work. Among the objects Erin received from her grandmother was a jewelry box that played The Platter's crooning love song “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” The lyrics refer to being blind to potential consequences down the line, as when in love. (“They said some day you’ll find / All who love are blind / When your heart’s on fire, you must realize / Smoke get in your eyes!”). *Smoke in Eye* appropriates The Platters lyrics and features evil eye cutouts against a background of gray marbling. In a literal sense, getting smoke in one's eyes is an uncomfortable

physical experience that momentarily afflicts one's vision. Often one turns away from the source of flame in an attempt to escape the situation, or the eye produces tears to flush the tiny ash particles away. Using this experience metaphorically, The Platters suggest you get smoke in your eyes on two occasions: when your heart is aflame with love, and when love dies. We must deal with the hazards of smoke both when we are blinded by the power of our emotion, and when the illusion of our emotion (in this case, love) recedes to expose the ways in which we were formerly deceived.

The Platters were not the only musical group to capitalize poetically on the “smoke in eye” phenomenon, nor is their interpretation of the expression singular. One pop singer excuses poor previous decisions with the explanation “must have had smoke in my eyes.” The country rock band Big and Rich warns of a woman who claims she just has smoke in her eyes, when her tears are in fact sorrowful. In all cases, the lyricists who utilize the phrase “smoke in eye” employ themes of deception, sorrow, and remorse. Considering miscarriage generally — the expectation to bring new life into the world and then to lose this chance against one's will without warning — it is indeed an even more painful event than The Platters' description of love lost, one of which we'd been so sure.

Taking a closer look at how Morrison chooses to illustrate the phrase, *Smoke in Eye* is a series of collaged, flocked eyes on marbled paper. Each features some version of an evil eye, cut out or mirrored in various iterations. A reprise of Morrison's earlier *Black Eye*, the pieces all reference the aforementioned necklace Morrison owned as a teenager in the 90s. An ancient symbol often worn as an amulet, the evil eye that has been used in a variety of religions as a talisman to ward off ill omen is now frequently appropriated in contemporary fashion. Here, the eye is disfigured. Its two-dimensional nature is clearly revealed by its overlapping, cut qualities. It is an abstracted representation of the necklace, which is in turn a knock-off of the original symbol. Either through its disfiguration, or its distance from its source, we can ration to guess it has lost some of its protective quality.



Fig. 18: *Ecstasy 1*, 2017
Enamel and metal leaf on gypsum cement, 32.5 x 32.5 inches



The eye situates itself atop a murky marbled ground. Made using the technique of marbling (to which Morrison, tongue in cheek, cites she gained first exposure in the back of a Hobby Lobby in Arkansas), the swirling blacks and grays take on the appearance of smoke. The atmosphere is at once seductive and oppressive, simultaneously spatial and planar. Morrison reminds us that marbling was allegedly used as a divination technique in ancient times, akin to reading tea leaves. We wonder if the eye is looking into the smoke as if for signs, begging for some semblance of order amidst a world aflame, or in grief. Then

again, perhaps the evil eye doubles as a normal human eye blinded by smoke exposure, or suffering the consequences of being misdirected and unprepared. The smoke has more visual dimensionality than the eye, and although the eye is the foreground, the figure is left appearing collapsed, flat, and superficial. That the evil eye is presented at all conjures the idea that there is something to ward against, something to watch for, but its distance from its source religions and original form compromises its power to do so. We are left feeling wary, vulnerable, and on edge for what is to come.

The Letdown, 2017 ▲
Installed at Ochi Projects in Los Angeles

Fig. 19: *Eye Chain Silver* (detail), 2017
Enamel and metal leaf on gypsum cement
46 x 72.75 inches





Smoke Palm (Fig. 20) is another piece of Morrison's that features smoke and themes of disillusionment, deception, and death. A cast palm frond with colored marbling in the plaster that takes on the appearance of smoke, its features and title suggest a palm in flame. David Pagel captured the feeling of Morrison's palms, fossil-like relics of destruction: "Erin Morrison's fossilized palm frond and post-apocalyptic mirage [both suggest] that Southern California is its own version of Pompeii," (Los Angeles Times, 2015). Considering the past two fire seasons, the worst years on record, smoking palms are an acute reality foretelling the consequences of climate change already upon us. With Trump's nuclear debates with North Korea and the scares both real and perceived of

Fig. 20: *Smoke Palm*, 2018
Ink on gypsum cement, 27.5 x 27.5 inches

imminent nuclear war, Los Angeles in ruin is not an inconceivable test site to imagine. Morrison's smoking palm lets us know that the material comforts that cushion us now will not sustain us for long.

Whether it be bomb or climate crisis, *Fortune's Fool* (Fig. 21) suggests that man is at fault for whatever disaster is stirring. The title is pulled directly from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Romeo refers to himself as "fortune's fool." Knowingly powerless over the forces that determine his fate, Romeo feels like a puppet left only to act out his own demise. Shakespeare's use of "fortune's fool" in this way inverted the 16th century use of the phrase "fool's fortune," meaning that fortune is only ever bestowed upon fools, who in turn misuse or abuse their financial power.



Fig. 21: *Fortune's Fool*, 2017
Enamel on gypsum cement, 28.75 x 28.5 inches

Looking back at the piece itself, we wonder which version of the phrase applies. In it a hand reaches, outstretched, toward a circular body. Both figures are embossed with linear patterns. On the hand, there are squares with crosses in them that look like pyramids viewed from above, and the reappearance of the heads from Erin's grandmother's pin, repeated and overlapped to form meandering lines on the hand's surface. The circle has wave-like peaks, as if oceans on a tiny planet the hand is reaching toward. The visual relationship between the subjects suggests the idea of an omnipotent God-man acting upon an object — reaching for its resources and affecting its future. Whether a product of war, climate change, or overpopulation, the smoking catastrophe lurking in Erin's imagery is not a chance disaster, but one with a clear and culpable cause: fortune's fool.

It seems more likely Erin is pointing blame at the political powers, lobbying forces, and corporations that are reaching towards earth's resources unconcerned for what might come down the line than at all of humanity. Made shortly after the Standing Rock protests in North Dakota to protect communal water and Sioux sacred sites, we recall the water they protected, already subject to an oil spill shortly following Trump's executive order to resume building. Given this interpretation, of a greedy hand outstretched, we return to the etymology of "fortune's fool," which Shakespeare inverted — fate only grants fortune to fools, suggesting the damage they cause is inevitable.

Whether intuitively or in a calculated way, Erin subjects' respond to current events. If asked, though, Morrison makes it clear she has been trying to return to the personal following grad school, to chase the "big ideas" less. To me, it is clear that these divisions of personal and political are not so distinct, and that the questions she is asking of gender, appropriation, environmental degradation, and the embodied experience of sorrow associated with all of these topics fit both categories. Still, despite its cynicism, there is a resilience that unifies the work across its subjects, a fierceness and tenacity that comes from being the underdog but a proud one. One of the few material tokens of matriarchal inheritance, Erin exalts jewelry and other household objects passed down through her family by virtue of enlargement, replication, and public display. Instead of killing an ecosystem, a fire catapults it into a new period of growth and diversification. Instead of feeling entitled to gaze sleazily upon disembodied genitals, viewers are swallowed into the vulva's gaze, a portal into another world where time moves more slowly and is more spacious. Instead of rushing one way or another, as in birth or dying, Erin holds us — preciously — in the space between, until we are uncertain whether we are coming or going, anyway. ■



Fig. 22: *Six Heads*, 2018
Enamel and ink on gypsum cement, 30 x 36 inches



THE CAD

Julian Lombardi founded The Contemporary Art Digest (The CAD) in 2016 to express a commitment to his unending self-education about artists' lives and work. Today, The CAD reaches over 100,000 viewers, catapulted by Lombardi's probing eye into the world of contemporary art with an emphasis on painting and the role of abstraction today. By exposing new audiences to work by living artists and initiating community-based art inquiry through social media, The CAD connects contemporary artists, the galleries and organizations that represent them, and art audiences around the globe. This volume represents The CAD's first expansion into print.

Serena Caffrey is a visual and performance artist, writer, and fertility awareness educator living in Los Angeles. Working durationally with the land as an intimate collaborator, she investigates the mundane and sublime energies that coexist in simple activities and natural cycles.

ERIN MORRISON

b. Little Rock, Arkansas

EXHIBITIONS, SOLO & TWO-PERSON

2019 Colony, Ochi Project, Los Angeles

2018 ZSONA MACO Art Fair, Ochi Projects, Mexico City

2017 The Letdown, Ochi Projects, Los Angeles
When the Fire Burns Out, Chimento Contemporary, Los Angeles

2016 Object Decorum, Ochi Gallery, Ketchum, Idaho

2015 Relief, Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles

EXHIBITIONS, GROUP

2019 Untitled, Art Fair, San Francisco, Ochi Projects

2018 Sexy X-Mas, The Lodge, Los Angeles
Death Show, Elevator Mondays, Los Angeles
Sexy Beast Gala and Silent Auction, Marciano Foundation, Los Angeles, Ochi Projects
Vacation, New York City
Heat Wave, Guererro Gallery, San Francisco
An Homage to Hollis Benton, Over the Influence Gallery, Los Angeles
Good Smoke/ Good Poke, o-o Gallery, Los Angeles

2016 End of Summer Summer Show
24 Hour Charlies, Malibu
A Plot of Land, Dutton Gallery, New York
Memory Theater by Srijon Chowdhury, Upfor Gallery, Portland
Deep Superficial Perceptions, CES Gallery, Los Angeles

2015 XX, Subliminal Projects, Los Angeles
When the Sun Hits, THE PIT, Los Angeles
One Foot on the Ground, James Harris Gallery, Seattle
LadyGirlyFemale, Hammock Gallery, Los Angeles

2014 Mirrored Collection, 2126 W Jefferson Blvd, Los Angeles
Summer Show: L'Art Projects, Los Angeles
Vessels: Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles
MAS ATTACK 3, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance
MFA Thesis Show #3: UCLA New Wight Gallery, Los Angeles
Inaugural Group Exhibition: Sonce Alexander Gallery, Los Angeles

2013 MFA 2014 Exhibition: UCLA New Wight Gallery, Los Angeles
GLAMFA: Cal State University Long Beach

EDUCATION

2014 MFA Painting UCLA

2006 BFA Memphis College of Art

HONORS

Stewart and Lynda Resnick Scholarship, 2013, UCLA
Edward J. and Alice Mae Smith Scholarship, 2013, UCLA
D'Arcy Hayman Scholarship, 2011, UCLA
OxBow Artist in Residence Centennial Grant, 2010, SAIC
New York Studio Program selection '05/06, Memphis College of Art

TEACHING

Visiting Artist Lecture Series, Pepperdine University
Undergraduate Program, Spring 2019
Visiting Artist Lecture Series, Claremont University Graduate
MFA Program, Fall 2015
Drawing Instructor, Santa Monica College, Fall 2014
Drawing Instructor, Summer Art Institute, UCLA, 2014
Visiting Artist, UCLA, James Welling's Issues in Contemporary
Art, Winter 2014
Teaching Assistant, UCLA, 2011-2014
Lecturer, SAIC OxBow Artist in Residence, Summer 2012

RESIDENCIES

OxBow, Saugatuck, MI, SAIC, 2010

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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LA Magazine, Andrea Alonso, 6.12.18
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Grounding the City of Angels, New American Paintings,
Erin Langner, 07.13.15
Women at Work, KCRW Los Angeles Art Talk,
Hunter Drohojowska-Philip, 03.26.15
Exhibition Review, LA Times, David Pagel, 03.20.15
Little Paper Planes Exclusive, Interview by Maggie Haas,
San Francisco, 01.07.14
Graphite Interdisciplinary Journal #4, Hammer Museum,
Los Angeles, Spring 2013
New American Paintings, pacific coast competition #97,
Open Studios Press, 12.11

Her work is held in private and public collections, including the Collection of Cedars Sinai Hospital, Memorial Sloan Kettering Collection, Fidelity Investments Corporate Contemporary Art Collection, and the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection.

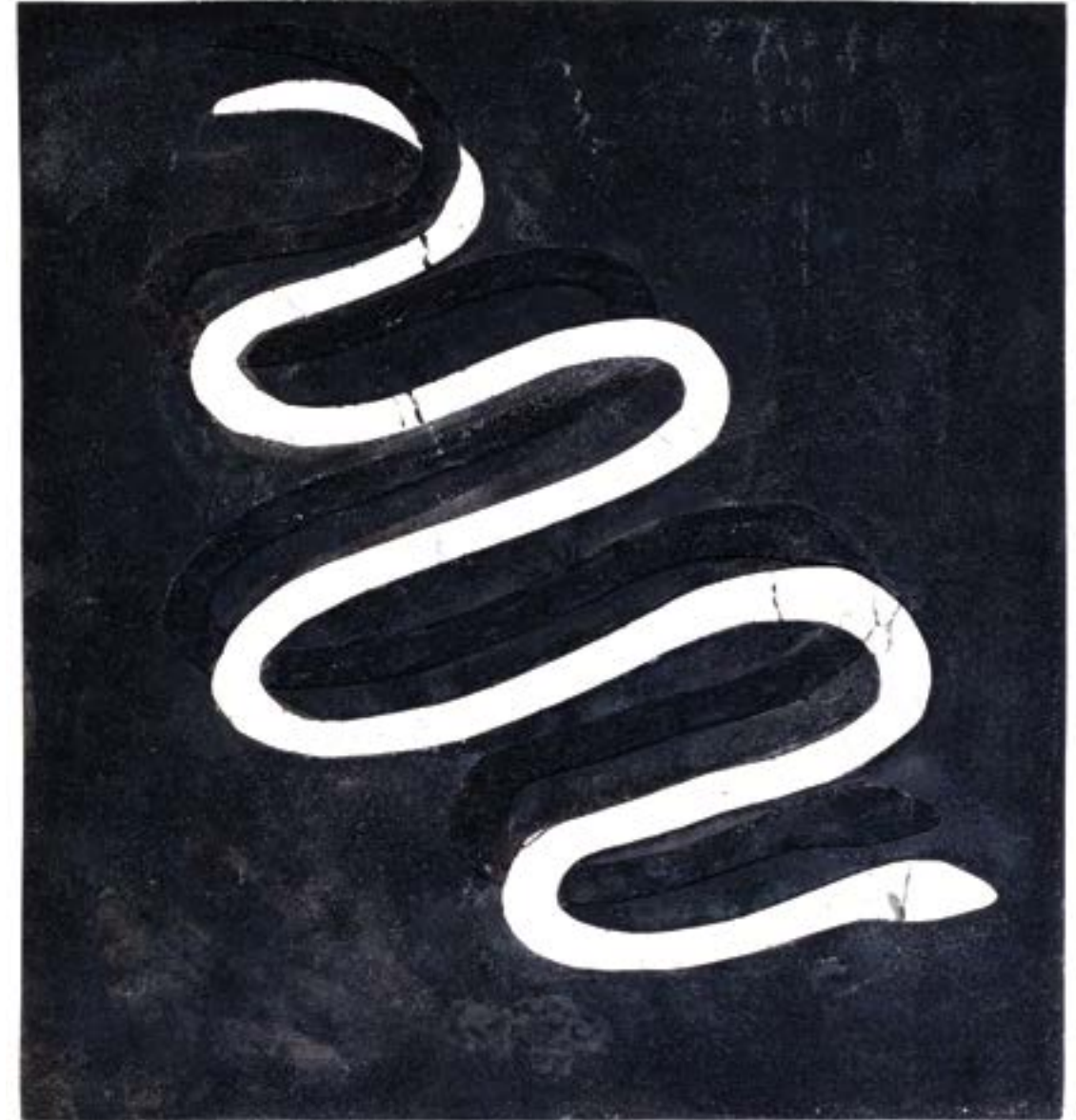


Fig. 23: *Levitaton*, 2017
Ink and enamel on fractured hydrocal, 34 x 36 inches

